

FOUR REASONS TO CHANGE THE DATE OF AUSTRALIA DAY

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It seems every country has to have its national day, whether to satisfy the insecurity of its citizens or to allow people to feel good that they are part of something good. Therein lies the problem with the date chosen for Australia Day – January 26th. Its only significance is that it marks the date the white people came to Australia- as Dick Smith says, First Fleet day. That makes the use of January 26th a race-based date for celebrations.

Australia remains the one country alone in the world that chooses the coming to its shores of the white race as a date to mark its modern nationhood.

There are at least four good reasons for changing the date. First, many argue they are not celebrating the event of January 26th at all – they are celebrating the good things that happened well after that. If so, they should have no gripe with changing the date. If the date is really not of particular interest to them, they should not complain if a new date is found.

Second, apparently the use of January 26th was first used in 1808 or 1818 by the newly arrived whites at Botany Bay to celebrate their new beginning away from old England. NSW kept the use of the date alive to celebrate its colony. There was no heed at all for the thousands of Aborigines in the colony at the time, or of dispossession, or of the killing of them. The celebration was as blind to the effect on Aborigines then as it remains the case today.

The day was first called Foundation Day or Anniversary Day before becoming widely adopted by all States in 1935 as Australia Day. The social and political environment of the 1935 era is yet another reason to move the date.

Third, 1935 was arguably the height of the white Australia policy. Asian and black immigration was officially opposed in order to keep the country predominantly white. Celebrating the coming of the white people on January 26th was, and is, an expression of the white Australia policy.

Some point out that the white Australia policy was formally dumped by the Whitlam government in 1972. Maybe so, but the attitudes and assumptions underlying it did not disappear altogether.

Would Australia have turned the boats back if the refugees had been white Rhodesians leaving Zimbabwe or Afrikaners leaving South Africa? Would the white refugees be on Manus Island hounded there by Australian naval forces? Whoever believes I am wrong with that example cannot doubt the white Australia policy is front and centre of Australia Day January 26th- it marks and celebrates the coming of the white race.

Four, those dogmatically loyal to January 26th claim the reasons for retaining the date are compelling. Why then have we not heard them?

Credit to Tasmania's print media for promoting debate about the appropriateness of January 26th as the national day. Shame on ABC radio for taking one side only, promoting the political propaganda of Australia Day (I have since learned that ABC is an official sponsor of the day and is therefore compromised) instead of acting impartially and promoting discussion.

Challenging the merit of a nation's national date of celebration will at first find resistance, as does any call for change. But change eventually comes around when the cause is just and is driven by people who know the difference between right and wrong. A young doctor called Bob Brown went on a hunger strike atop Mt Nelson in 1976 in protest against US nuclear naval vessels coming to Hobart. See any nuclear vessels around lately? The chook woman, Pam Clarke, rang her bells against battery hens and now most people eat free range eggs.

Local media scoffed at the first group of Aboriginals to march for land rights in Tasmania in 1977, and the catch-cry among Tasmanian politicians from then on was 'land rights on the mainland but not here'. We persisted and got land rights in 1995.

Today is not a protest: we gather to reflect on why this date is better than any of the other 364 days. Already others have suggested alternative dates such as ANZAC Day on April 25th. Another date is the first day the federal parliament sat on May 9th and another the date Australia ended apartheid against Aboriginals at the May 27th 1967 referendum. The day a treaty gets signed would be even better.

It is true, as some argue, alternative dates will have their faults and draw criticism. That is no reason not to consider new dates. Whatever criticism there is of the alternatives they will not attract the criticism of being based on race.